

CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

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EVELLE J. YOUNGER, *Attorney General*

Crime Prevention Unit
3580 Wilshire Blvd., 9th Floor
Los Angeles, California 90010

MRS. JUNE SHERWOOD, *Director*

MELANIE C. INGRAM, *Assistant Coordinator*

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

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Cedar House: A Treatment Center for Families with Child Abuse and Neglect Problems

Clara Lowry

Clara Lowry received her B.A. in psychology from William Jewell College in Missouri, and an M.S.W. from the University of Southern California in 1965. She has worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services in Child Welfare, and for the county's probation department both as a field probation officer and as a psychiatric social worker in the Las Palmas facility for disturbed/delinquent youth. She is a consultant on child abuse and neglect, a contract counselor to Family Service of Long Beach, and a co-founder of Cedar House.

Bobbi Kendig

Bobbi Kendig received her B.A. in English from Northwestern University in Illinois, and an M.S.W. from the University of Southern California in 1965. She has worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, and is a contract counselor with Family Service of Long Beach as well as a co-founder of Cedar House. Ms. Kendig also teaches adult classes in filial therapy through the Long Beach Unified School District.

The problem of child abuse in our society, if ignored, assures a continuing pattern of violence and crime. It is a documented fact that those who are violent towards others were themselves, almost invariably, victims of abuse. Abused children grow up to abuse.

Four years ago in Long Beach, California, two social workers and a motherly paraprofessional with experience in community organization started a program for the treatment and prevention of child abuse. The social workers (the authors) were part-time counselors at Family Service and had worked with families with abuse problems who had been ordered by the court to seek counseling. The authors became convinced that counseling one hour a week could not begin to touch the lonely, anxious lives of the isolated, frightened families in which children got hurt. From this conviction came the program called Cedar House, currently under the auspices of Family Service of Long Beach. During the past four years the program has found funding through a mosaic of agencies, both public and private: Trailback Lodge (now the Long Beach Youth Home), the Junior League of Long Beach, the City of Long Beach, the County of Los Angeles, the City of Lakewood, and many private donations.

The program of Cedar House is located in just that—a big, sturdy, sheltering house located at 605 Cedar Avenue in downtown Long Beach. Almost

all of the planning that went into the early development of the program evolved from one goal: to penetrate the isolation of abusive families. We were convinced that parents of battered children tended to feel isolated from those around them and were not able to reach out for help.

The house in which we meet is a comfortable house, far less threatening and more inviting than an office setting. Our group meetings take place around a dining room table with coffee, juice and snacks available. We feed people, physically and emotionally, for we believe it is not possible to give from emptiness. Parenting requires giving. If a parent has received nothing, he/she will have nothing to give, and the child is the one who starves.

To help decrease isolation, we do a great deal of outreach; that is, going out to the homes. For some of the families, it has been less threatening to meet us for the first time on their home ground. It is then a little safer to risk coming to Cedar House. Frequently we find that the families become very enthusiastic about Cedar House, come regularly for a time, and then suddenly do not come. We have learned to return to the home because the family is probably hurting in some way and they are not yet able to reach out for help. The outreach at this time is crucial. While we do have a hotline and while we do encourage our families to call ("Don't hit! Call!"), we find that there is a process by which people learn how and when to call for help. It takes an initial experience of receiving help at a critical time before it occurs to someone to call for help in a crisis. More often than not, once we have weathered one of their crises with them, they then call or drop in frequently—good times or bad—sometimes so frequently that we take the next step of teaching them how not to abuse *us*. It is all a process of learning how to get needs met appropriately.

Another of our basic convictions, even stronger now than when we started, is that parents do not really want to hurt their children. In a moment of rage or out of too severe concepts of discipline, some do indeed batter their children, but those that we see do not like that part of themselves. Thus when a child is hurt, the parents are also hurting. Given this conviction, it is imperative that we go directly to the parents when we see or hear that a child has been bruised, not only for the sake of the child but *also for the sake of the parents*. This means that our approach is supportive rather than confrontive. "We see that Johnny has some bruises on his back. We know that when children are getting hurt, all of you are hurting. What's happening, and how can we work together to ease some of the pressures? What would help?"

We know, too, that most children who are removed from their homes for reasons of child abuse later return to their parents. The experience of abuse and then separation is generally a traumatic one in any case. If the experience is one which robs the parents of their last shred of dignity, making them feel even worse about themselves, then the family as a whole has been harmed and the child's needs have not been well served. We have observed the effects on children, for instance, when they see their father led away in handcuffs. The child must, of course, be removed when he is in danger or when he has been willfully harmed. If the experience can be one which sets the parents on the road to finding help, however, then the child will be served still better.

We are well aware, of course, of our legal responsibility to report any abuse of a child to the police department or to the Children's Protective Service in the Department of Public Social Services. The families involved have been informed and are usually present when we call in our reports. We frequently accompany the families to court, both criminal and juvenile, primarily to lend support as they go through another very fearful experience. We prefer not to testify since the family's ability to trust is often delicate; but if we have strong feelings that a child could be in danger, then we are prepared to testify. At present we are working toward more communication with the court systems, and to clarify our role as perceived by them and as perceived by us. There is need for feedback between court systems and treatment programs.

A third conviction, very basic to all of us at Cedar House, is that people carry within them the answers to their own problems, given a safe milieu in which to look for those answers. In a sense, the parents become part of our team, all of us seeking answers to the problem of child abuse. We started with the basic components of counseling: group therapy (for mothers, for fathers, for couples, for children), individual counseling, marital counseling, and an experimental class teaching parents to do play therapy with their own children. We continually explore with the parents: What is helpful? What feels right to you, and what doesn't? What helps any of us to grow? We have added to our services, based on the needs that the parents themselves expressed to us, a parent education class (given at Cedar House by Long Beach City College), a homemaker class, group and individual play therapy for the children, a yoga class for relaxation, a dance class for the children, social gatherings, field trips, and advocacy and support in the community. Before our very eyes, we see people growing—staff, volunteers and clients—all sharing in the pain and excitement of growing.

Still another conviction of Cedar House is the importance of team thinking. Our program has a contract to serve at least 30 families. Since we work with entire families, both adults and children, that adds up to an enormous number of people. (On occasion we have had over forty families at a time.) Our staff now consists of seven members including two social workers, a psychologist, three paraprofessionals, and a secretary. At the same time we have twenty-five volunteers giving 125 hours per week, some from the Junior League of Long Beach, others who are college students, and still others who found us through other channels. The volunteers may participate in the adults' or the children's groups, serve as parent aides, handle the telephones and drop-ins (with a staff member on call for crisis), offer classes in sewing or cooking or yoga, arrange field trips, or whatever. Two clinical psychologists have volunteered to provide several hours of direct services and consultation. A psychiatrist volunteers one morning a month for consultation. This has truly become a community effort.

As a staff and in the larger team, we work very closely together on a basis of mutual trust. We have found this to be essential and rewarding for many reasons:

1. All our energies are needed for the challenging daily work with crisis-ridden families. We cannot afford to sap our energies with in-fighting.
2. We have found ways to air our differences, hear each other, and find

solutions to our problems. This flow of working together serves as a very helpful model to the parents, demonstrating to them: You can trust the people here, and problems can be solved.

3. With team thinking, the responsibility is shared, and the heavy, hurtful days when a family needs more than any one of us can give, becomes manageable through our mutual support. The field of child abuse treatment is notorious for burn-out and heavy turnover of staff. In this field there must be built into any program some emotional supports for the front-line worker, for anyone in whatever capacity who comes into direct contact with children who get hurt. Without such supports it is too easy to become overwhelmed and to see the problem as hopeless. It is not.
4. With team thinking, there is a far greater pool of talents and expertise for solving a variety of problems. If one of us is stumped, someone on the team will see a way that has not been seen. Our brain-storming sessions are very energizing to us all for this reason.

Team thinking has become a permeating life style for our program. As noted above, the volunteers are a crucial part of our team, participating in our staff meetings and working directly with the families in many capacities. The parents steer us to what works for them and what does not, and the children, too, have important things to say to us when we open our ears to listen. At the community level, Cedar House has continually received help in various ways from a network of concerned people.

From the beginning, Cedar House was interested in helping our isolated families become acquainted with the mainstream of our society and acquainting the community with the problems of child abuse families. The Long Beach Police Department, among others, has been very helpful to us. We found many parents naturally resentful of the "cops" who had taken their children from them. A sergeant in the police department's Child Abuse Unit agreed to sit in on one of our groups. The mothers were very nervous before the meeting, and we suspect the sergeant was also nervous, but the discussion that took place was candid on both sides. When the sergeant left, the mothers agreed that he was "all right," and in later months two of the mothers called him at different times for advice. After just one meeting there was more inclination to work with, not against, the law enforcement agency. After another such meeting with a particularly hated policewoman, one mother reported, "I never would have believed it! I got into an argument with one of my neighbors about Officer _____, and there I was, defending her!" The group members started to bring reports of other children in their neighborhoods who were abused or neglected. Many have said that they were not aware of what child abuse was until they came to the meetings at Cedar House.

Cedar House participates in the Greater Long Beach Child Trauma Council, an organization which agencies and interested people in the community attend voluntarily. This represents team thinking on a city-wide scale. At present the council is made up of representatives from 52 different agencies and organizations such as the Long Beach Police Department, the Department of Public Social Services, several hospitals (the meetings take

place at Long Beach Memorial Hospital), the Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College, physicians, nurses, attorneys, counseling agencies, etc. This has been a spawning ground for creative ideas in combating child abuse and educating the community. It has also been a meeting ground for concerned and committed community members to get to know each other, to learn what services are available, to share problems and discover where the gaps lie. Thanks to the council, some families have been served who would formerly have fallen through the cracks in service.

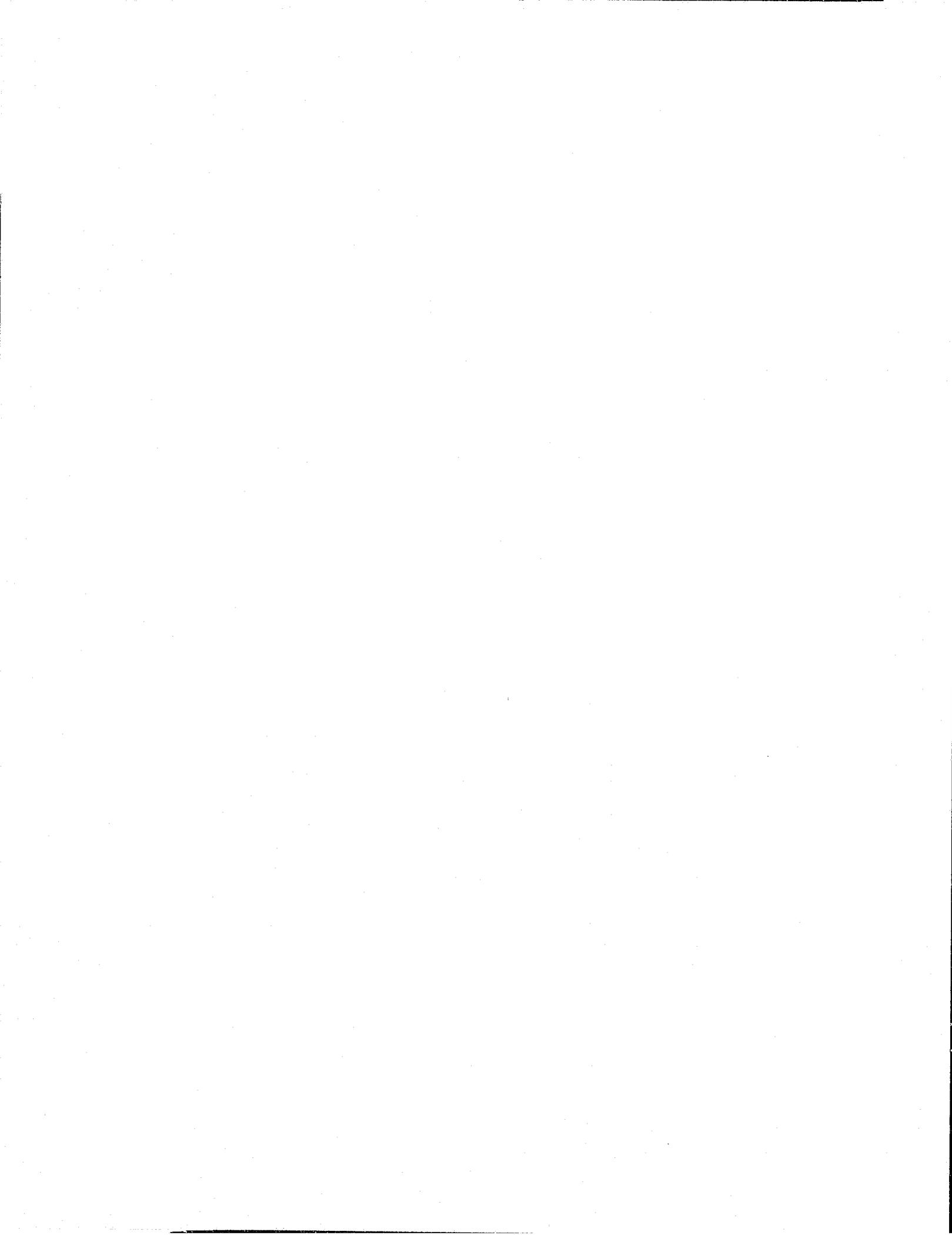
So what have we prevented in the past four years? We believe, in individual instances, that some children who were not hurt would have been if Cedar House had not been there, but of course this cannot be properly documented. There was one family known to at least a dozen agencies in the community, all of whom agreed that the four children should not be subjected to their home environment (schizophrenic parents, severe neglect of the children), yet a petition could not be sustained in court. Thanks to the outreach and documentation by Cedar House, along with the tenacity of the heretofore frustrated Children's Protective Services worker, the children are now in foster homes. Now we are working toward a more clear definition of emotional abuse and neglect for court purposes.

The first group at Cedar House met in January 1975. From then until early July 1978, our program has served 116 families (172 adults and 234 children) in what could be called saturation therapy. This means families were involved in several kinds of therapy at the same time and were seen at Cedar House a minimum of two times per week—some five times a week. (This figure does not include the average twelve families a month who received service through telephone or through sitting with us to figure where they go from here.) Of the families with whom we have worked intensively, 37 percent had been ordered by the court to seek counseling; 17 percent were referred by hospitals and doctors; 10 percent were self-referrals; and others were referred by schools, other mental health agencies, and police. Sixty percent of the families we worked with were those in which there was physical abuse, two in which children were killed, seven cases in which the abuse caused irreparable brain damage. Sexual abuse was the primary cause of referral in thirteen cases. It is increasingly evident, however, that the primary reason for referral does not reflect the full extent of abuse, and sexual abuse is much more common than that figure reflects. One of our early findings, in a group of parents brought together because of the physical abuse of their children, was that some 85 percent of the mothers had themselves been sexually exploited at an early age. In our experience, there is a clear correlation between physical abuse and sexual molestation. Twenty-four percent of our families came to Cedar House when their children were in foster homes. There was repeated abuse in 12 percent of the families. We are dealing with high-risk families in all cases. In all cases where re-abuse was reported, the abuse was less severe than that reported prior to the family's referral to Cedar House.

The greatest hope, of course, is that we can break the continuing chain of child abuse. Abused children frequently grow into isolated, violent adults who abuse their own children. Those who come to Cedar House (mostly pre-school children, though not exclusively) are exposed to a softer side of

life, a place where they can express their hurts and be heard, and a place where they can learn to play and to laugh. With our "saturation therapy," we hope to give both the parents and the children a sweeter bank of memories, a wider range of social skills, and a sense of a more trustworthy world. However much we decrease the violence in their homes, by that much we believe we are reducing the chances of the children's resorting to violence in their future. However much we welcome and work toward the parents' participation in the society around them, and as they begin to feel they belong among the rest of us, by that much will they feel better about themselves and less abusive toward their children. We know that these parents, when punishing the children, are frequently punishing themselves.

Cedar House is a small program which started with three ladies who wanted to try something new. Its ripples have reached further than we ever dreamed and, as with personal growth, the program's growth can sometimes be disconcerting. The past four years, however, have been challenging, rewarding and exciting.



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